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ABSTRACT

Most corporate funds for workplace literacy programs are invested in intermediate literate workers. Questions regarding these learners concern what should be expected of them; what they should expect of workplace literacy programs; who or what should determine these criteria; and ramifications of the answers. Issues that affect the answers are the drive to use work-based materials and problems; use of job-task analyses to build workplace curricula; employers' hesitancy to fund costly literacy training; and lack of worker input. Workplace literacy is defined as survival skills for the workplace and those particular skills employers want. A lack of concern for workers as learners and participants in a larger society underlies these definitions. If service providers rely upon job task analysis to develop and administer curricula, they may isolate learners even further by producing training programs as if they existed in social and cultural vacuums. The following questions should be asked: who are the people workplace literacy programs are serving and whether what they do is enough; whether workers understand how others shape their expectations; and whether those in power really understand the goals and needs of workers as learners. The answers have profound consequences for the ways in which service providers plan workplace literacy programs. (14 references) (YLB)

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What Can Workplace Literacy Programs Realistically Be Expected to Accomplish, And How do We Determine What this Should Be?

No one definition of Workplace Literacy effectively satisfies the complex web of goals and needs of the various and competing voices represented by this term. This is not to say that those of us who are concerned with workplace literacy should stop trying to define what it, or they, may be. It is to say that we need to take into consideration our own perspectives and the people we're serving--including corporations, the government, service providers, and individual workers. It behooves us also to acknowledge how our perspectives frame and determine, to a great extent, what we understand as workplace literacy and how this understanding frames the respective roles of all parties involved.

As a way of opening such lines of inquiry and introducing the programs of The Royce Center for Specific Learning Disabilities, my presentation will explore some of the assumptions made by government documents, corporate demands, and literacy theorists in the context of one worker's desires and goals, those of a man I will call Collin Williams. This analysis will construct a context for discussing what choices the Royce Center of Savannah has made to build its own workplace literacy programs for companies and offer all of us--this audience--an opportunity to ask what workplace literacy programs like Royce's might realistically be expected to accomplish.

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Collin Williams has been working for Beatrice Hunt/Wesson in Savannah Georgia for at least 15 years. As a boiler, pretreatment, deodorizer operator, he actually performs three different jobs. On alternating weeks he is responsible for operating the boiler room, taking care of pretreatment processing for cooking oil, and deodorizing the oil before it gets shipped out to wholesale and retail markets.

Outside of work, but with his work colleagues, Collin has organized and continues to be a leading member of a seven person interdenominational fellowship group, which has met every Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m. in Shoney's for about a year and a half to study the week's Bible lesson. He subscribes to at least three magazines Enterprise, Jet, and Change of Time and the morning news or evening press daily.

Collin is clearly a motivated student, having made gains in his reading level competence in eight months of study, and enough confidence in himself and his accomplishments at Royce to address the student body of Royce's Adult Literacy program at both an awards luncheon and graduation dinner and to accept a position on the Royce Center's public relations committee. Though Collin's teachers and tutors admit that he is a more advanced student than they have typically taught at Royce, he is still considered by Royce administrators, teachers, and tutors to fall within what the U.S. Department of Labor and Royce have found to be about 65% of the Nation's workforce population. This is a population of workers to which Jorie Phillippi refers as "intermediate literates," those functioning at about the 6th to 9th grade

levels. Though this group has, perhaps, received less press than the 10% of the workforce that is functioning on or below a 5th grade level and the population with which The Royce Center has been most concerned, the larger group is the primary target population for most corporate Workplace Literacy programs.

While the 10% must not be forgotten (Sharon will be focusing on this group in her talk), there is little doubt that most corporate funds will be invested in the larger, intermediate literate group of workers, in hopes of greater and faster returns. And, though the Royce Center works directly with both populations and will continue to do so, for the purposes of my presentation I am concerned primarily with the so-called "intermediate literates." Given my focus, several questions come to mind. What is and should be expected of these learners? What should they expect of workplace literacy programs? Who or what is to determine these criteria? And, what are the ramifications of the choices that are made to answer these questions?

As a way to address these questions, I'd like to mention a few issues concerning Adult, workplace literacy. First, I'd like to note that theorists such as Lauren B. Resnick, Larry Mikulecky, and Michael Diehl have made it pretty clear that school-based learning differs greatly from on-the-job learning. Because of this, Mikulecky, among others, concludes that a curriculum for workplace literacy which does not involve workbased materials and problems is significantly less likely to generate what they call "literacy skills" that transfer readily to the workplace.

Secondly, the drive to use workbased materials and problems has led researchers like Mikulecky, Jorie Phillippi, Joanne R. Nurss, and Nancy D. Chase ["Hospital-Based Workplace Literacy"] to turn to job-task analysis, which consists of "breaking major [job] tasks into steps, substeps, and single behaviors in order to determine what fact or concept students need to know or learn to perform it. These task analyses are then used to build workplace curricula.

Thirdly, while Pat Rigg and Francis Kazemek (qtd in French 87) suggest that literacy in a work-setting can be more than what they call "survival skills" in the workplace, Mary Tenopyr points out that because adult literacy training on the job is costly it's not surprising "that employers are generally conservative about literacy training for which the cost/benefits are less clear than they are for job skills training" (qtd in French 16). Thus, what Kazemek defines as "literacy development"--"'developmental, empowering process' (334) focusing on the individual, his needs, the social process of reading and writing, and 'how the adult relates all of these things to self and the world'" (335) (qtd in French 13)--is less likely to be supported by corporate funding than job skills training.

Finally, I'd like to point out that most of the literature in print about workplace literacy has been written with and by an audience that does not include the workers themselves. These practices have led to numerous problematic assumptions of which I would like to point out a few.

A 1989 summary of a two-year joint project of the American

Society for Training and Development and the U.S. Department of Labor entitled "Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want," represents itself as the definitive statement for corporate America. It emphasizes the basic skills rhetoric of what Rigg and Kazemek have called "survival skills" in the workplace. It's "Preface" states that this document "maps out the skills that employers want and charts the strategic relevance of each skill." These include "Learning to learn," "Reading, writing, and computation," "Listening and speaking," "Creative thinking and problem solving," "Personal management," "Interpersonal negotiation, and teamwork skills," and "Organizational effectiveness and leadership." A model for establishing a basic skills program, as well as generic curriculum for each skill, is included." And the document offers a "step-by-step process for establishing a basic workplace skills program." The basic skills rhetoric of this document is striking.

As such it defines workplace literacy as something different from what someone like Harvey Graff calls "universal literacy," which is defined by: 1) its ability to be used comparatively across time and space;" 2) its concern with a set of techniques for decoding and reproducing texts; and 3) its "use in and application to precise, historically specific material and cultural contexts." (Kintgen 82-3). It's different also from what Kazemek calls "literacy development"--what other researchers like Hunter and Harman call "functional literacy," which they define as:

> The possession of skills *perceived as necessary by*

> *particular persons and groups* (my emphasis) to fulfill *their own self determined objectives* (my emphasis) as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. [stop reading here but point to the handout for the full definition.] (qtd in Soifer 3)

Workplace literacy, as defined by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) is not necessarily comparable across time and space, it is not primarily concerned with decoding and reproducing texts, nor is it something fulfilling "self determined objectives." It is seen instead by the ASTD as job skills training, a response to what it calls "the most compelling of circumstance--economic need" (8). In defining which skills employers want, it neglects to consider what service providers and, more importantly, what individual workers want and need. In fact, though the skills it outlines are undoubtedly desired by businesses, and though these skills may sound empowering for workers beyond the workplace setting, what underlies these familiar sounding terms is a troubling lack of concern for individual workers as learners and participants in a larger society.

A poignant example of this rhetoric may be noted in the ASTD's definition of "Listening and Oral Communication." The report defines oral communication as "providing workers with an understanding of the importance of voice inflection and body language," as well as recognizing their dominant styles of

communication, how they are manifested, and how they differ from the dominant style of the Workplace Literacy, so that they can "adjust their [own] dominant style to someone whose style differs" (11). While, I--a college composition teacher of Adult and college aged Basic and General writing courses--understand the problems of engaging learners in discourse communities that differ from their own, I realize that having my students recognize their "dominant styles of communication" is exceedingly difficult and is a never-ending process. Furthermore, engaging in this kind of self-reflexive work assumes that I, a teacher, recognize these complications and am able to help students see them.

Collin Williams offers an instructive example of the difficulties involved. When I asked him why he chose to enter the Royce Adult Literacy program after it was introduced to him at Beatrice/Hunt-Wesson by Ruthanne, he told me "I've never had a problem understanding what ever I read," but "It was important to me to improve my spelling ability." Though I wasn't sure what Collin meant by "spelling ability," I realized that it was a familiar metaphor he probably thought I would understand and one that he felt comfortable using to discuss his own needs and goals. When I asked for further explanation he responded:

> I feel like I been what you call kind of fortunate. I've never had no really major bad experience, but I can remember on occasion, I can remember some things that I knowed but I needed to write it down, and by not being able to spell, I couldn't put it down. And when

> you can't put something down, a person takes for granted that you don't even know it. But a lot of time I know but I can't spell what I want to put down.

Clearly "spelling" for him includes a great deal more than getting the correct letters of the alphabet in the right order. And, though less obvious but arguably more important, "spelling," as he uses it here, includes even more than getting correct words into correct sequences. Collin's predicament of knowing that he couldn't "spell" what he wanted to "put down," even if he knew the information he wanted to communicate is more than a lexical problem. It's also what I understand Charles Schuster to define as an inability to be "heard."

In the "Ideology of Literacy" Schuster explains "illiteracy" in terms of the mythic figure Cassandra, who Apollo gave "the gift of prophecy, but because she refused the god's amorous advances, she is cursed by him so that her prophecies are never believed" (227). Schuster explains, "For Cassandra, meaning becomes meaninglessness. . . . She cannot learn anything that will allow her to communicate what she knows, what she feels to be certain. He continues, "Cassandra's predicament mirrors that of many individuals as well as whole classes in American society--intelligent, knowledgeable, informed individuals who cannot participate interactively in meaning making through language."

Such is the case Collin makes in his discussion about spelling with me that he can't communicate. Nonetheless, what the ASTD fails to realize, and what Collin is unlikely to know, is that adjusting one's "dominant styles of communication to

someone whose style differs" is a great deal more complex than either might have imagined. If Schuster's definition of literacy--*the power to be able to make oneself heard and felt, to signify*--is an accurate one, then offering Collin the skills to spell words, use a dictionary, construct sentences, and speak publicly is what Graff calls deciphering code and reproducing texts, which is perhaps a first step in "being heard." But "being heard" assumes what Schuster calls an "active responsiveness," which he explains "is precisely what is missing for those branded as illiterate." He continues, "Through acts of social, political, and economic exclusion by the dominant culture, they have been denied genuine listeners, denied response on the part of those whom they are purportedly addressing" (229).

In this light, an inability to spell for Collin can be defined as an inability to be heard both lexically and across social, political, and economic boundaries. And While the rhetoric of "step-by-step processes" appeals to corporate management and boards of directors, if service providers rely upon job task analysis data to build and administer their curricula there are <u>real possibilities</u> that they may isolate learners even further by producing training programs as if they existed in social and cultural vacuums. Such programs could easily represent themselves as autonomous models of learning, ones that Brian Street, Suzanne Clark and Lisa Ede, suggest "inherently den[y] the importance of culture, ideology, and politics in daily life" (Clark 278), thus preventing learners in the workplace from "being heard" as Schuster defines it.

Furthermore, such curricula lends itself to a pedagogy that does exactly what Shirley Brice Heath warns against in "The Fourth Vision." She writes that "the overwhelming tendency of education today is to simplify, standardize, and make predictable" (303). A task analysis driven curriculum could easily, though not necessarily, give in to this tendency and ignore what Heath explains as "extraordinarily complex . . . theories of learning, human interaction, and understanding of socioeconomic forces and their relation to power that underlie these alternatives" (303). She explains further that "We must be cautious that the flexible, dynamic, and highly creative approaches to reading, writing, listening, and speaking . . . do not become reinterpreted as simplified ready-made teacher-proof programs."

So then, when I ask, what is and should be expected of workers in the workplace, I am asking who are workplace literacy programs really serving, and is what they do enough? When I ask what workers should expect of these programs, I am asking whether they understand how their expectations are shaped by what others have told them they can or should accomplish. When I ask, who or what is to determine these criteria, I am asking whether those in power who establish guidelines and "Wants" really understand the goals and needs of <u>workers as learners</u> and how to meet these needs in order to meet what the ASTD calls the "most compelling of circumstances--economic need." And when I ask what the ramifications of the answers to these questions are, I am suggesting that they have profound consequences for the ways in

which service providers like Royce go about planning their curricula and goals for Workplace Literacy programs.

As a way to close my comments and introduce the models of learning and programs of the Royce Center for Specific Learning Disabilities, I'd like to turn the floor over to Sharon and Ruthanne to offer the perspective of one service provider that has been working with marginal populations of learners for over twenty years and developing workplace literacy programs for the past two. Sharon will describe the roles of tutors, professionals, and learners in Royce's programs by explaining the basic academic model of learning that the Center has developed over the years to serve the 10% functioning below 6th grade levels. Ruthanne will highlight her efforts over the past three years to pull together the Regional Adult Literacy Partnership, and discuss the many workplace programs that Royce has begun to develop. Ruthanne will conclude by returning to many of the questions I have raised, as well as others arising from issues in both her own and Sharon's presentations.

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